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Interim report of the Secretary-General on the situation in the Central African Republic subsequent to the press statement of 7 July 2006 by the President of the Council

I. Introduction

1. In his press statement of 7 July 2006 (SC/8771/AFR/1406), the President of the Security Council requested me to submit to the members of the Council, in October 2006, a report on the situation in the Central African Republic. This report is submitted in accordance with that request. It summarizes the situation in the country, with particular reference to the political, security, military and socio-economic aspects and to human rights.

II. The political situation

2. Since my last report, dated 27 June 2006 (S/2006/441), the Head of State of the Central African Republic, General François Bozizé, issued an invitation on 28 July 2006 to all the country's political groups and social strata to take part in a dialogue on peace and security. The participants unanimously agreed that lack of security was the chief cause of the slowdown in economic activity and trade, and that it was holding back development.

3. During the three-month period under review, disagreements persisted within many of the political parties, chiefly as a result of crises in leadership and reorganization. The Minister of the Interior, who is responsible for internal security, issued a circular on 3 August 2006 prohibiting access to the media for political parties prey to internal division, because of the "risk to public order arising from the insulting and discourteous statements being made by the various camps". On the same occasion, he set a time limit of three months for political organizations with dual leadership to come forward with a single set of leaders, under pain of suspension. The Minister's injunction was perceived by the political class as interference by the executive in their internal affairs.

4. At the request of the Minister of the Interior and with the consent of the leaders of the parties concerned, on 21 August 2006 the United Nations Peacebuilding Support Office in the Central African Republic (BONUCA) organized a meeting to clarify the terms of the circular. The discussions were also attended by the Chairperson of the committee responsible for monitoring the outcome of the national dialogue, and by journalists and representatives of the diplomatic

06-56856 (E) 201006 201006

community. The discussions helped to dispel tension, both within the parties themselves and between the Minister and the parties.

5. The participants made a recommendation to the executive to refrain from interfering in the affairs of the political parties, and instead to make the political, security and socio-economic environment part of its own official agenda, so as to preserve the democratic gains already made. They also agreed: (a) to prepare a text to put into effect the order relating to political parties and the status of the opposition; (b) to refrain from using the media to disseminate insulting comments likely to stir up hatred or to create an unhealthy political climate; and (c) to observe discipline in their parties by strictly applying their rules and regulations.

6. For his part, the Minister of the Interior urged the political organizations concerned to comply with the laws and regulations governing their existence and functioning. The participants were satisfied with the outcome of the discussion and asked BONUCA to organize similar meetings on a regular basis, since they were helpful in bringing about a peaceful and sustainable climate for social and political organization.

7. During the same period the Constitutional Court, pursuant to a request lodged by the President of the National Assembly for an advisory opinion on the holding of several mandates, decided on 25 August 2006 that "the office of an elected Member of Parliament is completely incompatible with any other function of the executive, and such person, if he or she opts to fill any post other than that of an elected member of the legislature, shall be replaced de jure by a substitute, who shall be at liberty either to resign the office or to exercise it until the end of the legislative period". This decision affected three cabinet ministers, one of whom preferred to resign from the Government.

III. Military and security situation

8. The lack of security continues to be a major concern in the Central African Republic. Although the security situation in the capital has stabilized to some extent, aside from incidents of armed robbery and other offences the situation in the interior of the country is still precarious, particularly in the north and centre, where roadblockers, armed bands and rebels continue to prey on the civilian population, for example by kidnapping the children of herdsmen for ransom and attacking traders on the main highways.

9. The attack launched at the end of June by armed groups against an outpost of the Central African Armed Forces (FACA) and the Multinational Force (FOMUC) of the Central African Economic and Monetary Community (CEMAC) in the town of Gordil, in the north-western part of the country, near the Central African Republic/Chad/Sudan border triangle, resulted in deaths and injuries on both sides. The attack confirms that rebel groups are operating in the north of the Central African Republic and that the area of insecurity is gradually expanding from the north-west towards the north-east, mainly from the Ouham and Ouham Pendé prefectures towards the Vakaga region bordering on Darfur in the Sudan.

10. The recent relative calm in the region during the rainy season could come to an end with the imminent return of the dry season, which might lead to renewed attacks and other actions by the armed groups. The uncertainty surrounding the electoral

process in the Democratic Republic of the Congo is an added source of concern. If that situation took a turn for the worse, the Central African Republic would not be able to deal with the resulting influx of Congolese crossing the Oubangui or Ouaka rivers.

11. Until the current reorganization process has been completed and operational capability in the field has been strengthened, the Central African Armed Forces will continue to be supported by FOMUC, whose mandate has been extended until June 2007. Plans have been made for the transfer of responsibilities. The reorganization of the defence and security forces is still at an early stage and requires a strong commitment from donors.

12. At the subregional level, despite some progress, the security situation of the Central African Republic continues to be precarious, aggravated by the situation in the neighbouring countries, particularly Chad and Sudan. The Government of the Central African Republic is still threatened by rebels and armed bands established along the border with Chad and Sudan. The Head of State of the Central African Republic himself has publicly acknowledged that "security is seriously threatened in the northern part of the country, which is virtually living under occupation, posing a grave threat to the integrity of the national territory". He made an urgent appeal to the international community to help his country find a suitable solution to that situation.

13. The recent rapprochement between Sudan and Chad, as evidenced by the agreement of 26 July 2006, signed by the Heads of State of those two countries, is encouraging. Nonetheless, the renewed hostilities in eastern Chad in September 2006 and in Darfur, together with the presence of rebels and armed groups in Central African territory, are discouraging hopes for a lull in the conflict. This pernicious climate is unlikely to help improve the security situation in the Central African Republic.

14. Follow-up to and implementation of the recommendations made in the context of the tripartite Cameroon/Central African Republic/Chad initiative on cross-border security, facilitated by BONUCA, are continuing. In that context, the Governments of Cameroon and the Central African Republic signed an agreement on 24 August 2006, in Bangui, establishing a standing joint commission to combat cross-border crime.

15. Furthermore, the special summit meeting of CEMAC, held in N'djamena on Monday, 7 August 2006, mandated President Omar Bongo Ondimba, Chairman of the Ad Hoc Committee on the Central African Republic, and President Denis Sassou Nguesso, current Chairman of the African Union, to study ways and means of addressing the security problem in the Central African Republic, in particular in the north-eastern part of the country.

16. A subregional approach to resolving the crisis in the Central African Republic and promoting its long-term stabilization should continue to be given preference. I therefore associate myself with the decision by which the Security Council, in its resolution 1706 (2006) of 31 August 2006 on the Sudan, encourages "addressing regional security issues". In that context, I should like to note that Presidents Bozize and Déby Itno support the deployment of United Nations troops along their borders with the Sudan.

IV. Humanitarian situation/operational activities for development

17. Roadblocking and confrontations between the regular army and rebel groups have had a negative impact on the humanitarian situation and operational activities for development, especially in the north-western and north-eastern parts of the country. United Nations humanitarian missions in these areas have been unable to operate outside the urban centres because of the insecurity created by roadblockers, rebels and other armed groups.

18. United Nations agencies have continued to provide support to the Government under the United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) 2004-2006. Their interventions have highlighted good governance, implementation of the project for the reintegration of former combatants and support to communities, post-conflict recovery, humanitarian assistance (in particular to internally displaced persons facing serious food shortages), agricultural development, education and health, assistance to victims of sexual violence and international protection of the 22,000 foreign refugees living in the Central African Republic.

19. Financing amounting to US$ 5.5 million from the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) has enabled the Inter-Agency Standing Committee to enhance its emergency assistance in several areas and has helped the country team to finance activities and projects under the Consolidated Appeal Process (CAP) 2006. Nonetheless, the international response to the precarious humanitarian situation in the Central African Republic remains inadequate, having met only 42 per cent of the expressed needs. The Inter-Agency Standing Committee has therefore kept up its advocacy efforts and has launched a semi-annual review of the CAP 2006, headed by the Prime Minister.

V. Human rights situation

20. The human rights situation, which is closely linked to the political and security context, has been marked by a strong resurgence of acts of violence by roadblockers, unidentified armed gangs and regular soldiers, particularly in the northern parts of the country. The soldiers at times act as "prison guards" and violate the physical integrity of the accused, largely with impunity. Many cases of violations of the right to life have also been recorded during the period under review. Security roadblocks sharply curtail the freedom of movement and have become veritable traps for road users. The national authorities have made considerable efforts, however, to limit the number of these roadblocks. As for investigations, the procedure is often tainted by irregularities, in particular by violations of time limits on police custody.

21. As for the judiciary, the criminal court held its annual session during the period under review and considered many cases, including those of persons accused of offences against the internal security of the State. The trials were held publicly, in a fair and transparent manner. The court showed its professionalism and ruled to acquit all the accused.

22. As part of its activities, the Human Rights Section of the Office continued its support for non-governmental organizations and national institutions. It organized training seminars and workshops in order to strengthen their capabilities.

06-56856

VI. Economic, financial and social situation

23. The economy registered a growth rate of 2.7 per cent (compared to 2.4 per cent in 2005). This improvement is linked to the partial reimbursement by the State of debts owing to cotton growers, the distribution of inputs and the purchase of current production. The persistence of exogenous factors, however, weighs heavily on the economy: thus, soaring petrol prices and the downturn in the prices of the main farm export products, coffee and cotton, led to a 2.5 per cent drop in the terms of trade. The unrest in the northern part of the country, which is plagued by roadblockers and other armed gangs, has also contributed to an economic slowdown.

24. Government finances are still marked by a shortage of resources, preventing the State from covering its expenditures. The result has been a recurrent deficit and an unsustainable debt burden. Nonetheless, the Government is continuing its efforts to maintain control of the wage bill by monitoring the list of pensioners and verifying qualifications, and it is also reforming the customs sector. A joint International Monetary Fund/World Bank/African Development Bank mission to Bangui from 12 to 19 August 2006 for the purpose of assessing the execution of the second post-conflict programme, adopted in January 2006, recommended that the Government should continue its efforts to improve the management of the national treasury. Revenues rose slightly at the end of June 2006, but the Government overspent by 0.3 billion CFA francs on payroll costs, and by 8.4 billion CFA francs on non-wage costs. On the whole, the State's overall performance showed some improvement over the preceding quarters, but non-wage costs were not sufficiently reduced to achieve the cumulative primary-balance target.

25. The International Monetary Fund invited the Central African authorities to make every effort to meet all quantitative targets as soon as possible, in order to allow for the opening of discussions on the preparation of a programme under the Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility, an essential condition for reaching the decision point of the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Debt Initiative. In this context, the World Bank and the African Development Bank have pursued their dialogue with the Government on the clearing of the Central African Republic's arrears to the multilateral financial institutions. This discharge of debt is a necessary precondition for the effective re-engagement of these donors.

26. The social situation has been marked by strikes in the education, transport and customs sectors, and by the demand on the part of secondary and university students for scholarships. In particular, as a result of recent steps taken by the Head of State to reform the administration of customs and excise taxes, customs workers called a strike on 5 September 2006 to demand that these measures, providing for the redeployment of workers to other offices, be annulled. They also decided to file suit against the Government.

VII. Observations/recommendations

27. Despite the efforts made so far, the general situation in the Central African Republic is still volatile, as a result of both endogenous and exogenous factors. The constitutional order re-established in 2005 has been threatened for some time by the deterioration of the political, socio-economic and financial, humanitarian and security situation in the country. Central Africans must give priority to consensus-

building and dialogue to smooth out their differences, especially against the current backdrop of financial precariousness, which persists despite efforts to stabilize the budget. I am encouraged by the current discussions between the international financial institutions and the State aimed at reaching a cooperation agreement between the two parties.

28. Nonetheless, the persistent lack of security, in particular on the borders with Chad and the Sudan, represents a direct threat to stability in the Central African Republic and its neighbours. The defence and security forces, newly reorganized with the support of France, are still unable to repel the armed groups in the northern and north-eastern parts of the country. Therefore, the Government of the Central African Republic, with the support of the other countries of the subregion, is requesting the international community to provide additional resources to help the armed forces, backed by FOMUC, to enhance their operational capabilities so that they can restore security throughout the territory.

29. The Central African Government has requested the renewal of the mandate of BONUCA for another year. Through the good offices of my Special Representative in the Central African Republic, I am pursuing discussions with a view to determining the priority areas in respect of which our commitment remains essential to the consolidation of peace in this country.

30. I should like to pay a warm tribute to my Special Representative, General Lamine Cissé, and to the United Nations staff members in the Central African Republic for their devotion and courage in the performance of their duties during this especially difficult and stressful period.